

CAROLINE MOOREHEAD

Anatomy of an Accident

A Day in the Life of Abed Salama: A Palestine Story

By Nathan Thrall

(Allen Lane 272pp £25)

A Day in the Life of Abed Salama is an expanded version of an article written for the *New York Review of Books* that set its author, Nathan Thrall, on the path to becoming a widely admired journalist. The book follows one Palestinian father as he tries, with mounting despair, to discover what has become of his five-year-old son, Milad, following a road accident a decade ago. The events described in the book have, of course, been dwarfed by the horrors currently unfolding in Israel and the Gaza Strip. Thrall does not discuss Hamas or Gaza, and the book went to press long before the attack of 7 October. Nevertheless, his calm and thoughtful account is a reminder of the value of clear-headed analysis in times of crisis.

At 8.45 one February morning in 2012, an ancient, creaky bus carrying a party of children on a school outing in the Jerusalem municipality from the Nour al-Houda kindergarten was struck by an eighteen-wheel, thirty-ton truck. It was raining hard, the truck driver was inexperienced and untrained and had a raft of traffic convictions behind him, and his vehicle careened across the entire width of the road. The bus, which was stationary, was hit so violently that it turned over before a short circuit in the fuse box caused it to catch fire. Strong winds fanned the flames.

The site of the accident was a stretch of road in Area C, which after the Oslo Accords of 1993 remained under the control of the Israelis, whose emergency services, police and soldiers were stationed not far away. For a while, none of them turned up. However, a medical team from UNRWA happened to be nearby and, together with the people who had gathered, began to break the windows of the burning bus and drag the children and their teachers out. Some were already dead; others were so badly burned as to be unrecognisable. By the time the emergency services showed up, most of those still alive had been ferried to hospital by people with cars. Six small children and one teacher were dead.

What Thrall sets out to do is to put to one side the question of the two-state solution and describe what he sees as the reality on the ground: that Israel controls and administers 90 per cent of the territory between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean, a situation that produced the conditions that led to this tragedy.

The Oslo Accords, which created the Palestinian Authority, were intended to launch a peace process between Israelis and Palestinians. In practice, Israelis used the time to shrink the Palestinian presence in Greater Jerusalem and increase Jewish settlements on confiscated land, with the support of the government and the taxpayer-funded World Zionist Organisation. Thrall writes at length about the separation barrier that began to go up in the mid-2000s, taking the form of a series of fences, trenches and barbed wire over 440 miles in length and, in the environs of Jerusalem, a 26-foot-high concrete wall. He describes how Dany Tirza, an Israeli captain in the reserves who drew up the maps for the Oslo Accords, carefully designed a transport system allowing Jewish settlers to bypass Palestinian cities and cutting off enclaves of Palestinians from the emergency services. Palestinians were relegated to circuitous routes, endless checkpoints and interminable traffic hold-ups. All of these were factors that led to the school bus accident.

Thrall's tone is measured and the details he provides are well chosen. Following the life of Abed Salama, he outlines his early days as the son of a prosperous farmer, the loss of the family lands, his involvement in a Marxist-Leninist faction of the PLO and the months he spent in prison. He was tortured and placed in administrative detention, not knowing when he would be let out. Roughly 40 per cent of all Palestinian men and boys were arrested in the decades following the Israeli occupation of the West Bank in 1967. This has been enough, he writes, to traumatise an entire

society. Milad was his youngest son from a second marriage.

Other parents of the burned and dead children are described frantically trying to reach the accident through terrible traffic, gathering to wait for news, going from hospital to hospital, giving DNA samples, identifying charred bodies and listening to rumours that alternately gave them hope and filled them with dread. Some of the bodies returned to them were too severely burned to be given the usual rituals for the dead.

From the stories of the people who arrived at the scene, both Palestinians and Israelis, Thrall fans out to describe all aspects of the occupation, from the loss suffered by the Palestinians on the West Bank of their natural resources to the different-coloured ID cards which regulate the movements of those who carry them. He writes of the anguish of the parents, as the hours passed and hope ran out, and the effects the accident had on their lives, the break-up of marriages and the blame parents subjected each other to for allowing their children to go on the school outing in such terrible weather.

The official investigation into the accident focused on the actions of the driver of the truck and the fact that he was going at nearly twice the speed limit. He was sentenced to thirty months in jail. What the report omitted to cover was the failure of Israeli emergency services to arrive quickly at the scene, the hold-ups to Palestinian ambulances caused by checkpoints, the terrible conditions of the road and the existence of the separation wall, which forced Palestinians to make long and dangerous detours.

In 2014, John Kerry, the American secretary of state at the time, caused uproar when he said that there was a risk of Israel turning into an 'apartheid state'. Such was the outrage that Kerry was forced to retract his comments, but they stuck with Thrall, who as a Jew living in Jerusalem feels responsibility for the 'policies [that] are being carried out in the name of all Jewish people'. His sober book provides a terrible picture of the legacy of years of violence and mistrust in the West Bank. In the light of the events of 7 October and what has followed since, anything better than the dismal situation he describes is now unimaginable. Even the most sensible commentators seem at a loss for ideas.